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WORTH THE RISK: BALANCING FORCE PROTECTION VERSUS EFFECTIVE COIN

by

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Abstract

Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations have been a reality for nation-states for millennia and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. The US military should strive to understand how to conduct them successfully. All military activities have associated risks and COIN is no different. Commanders who aptly manage these risks are more likely to achieve success. In COIN, force protection is one key risk commanders must balance to create the opportunity for success. This paper concludes that although protecting the force is necessary in any threat environment, an overemphasis on force protection actually limits the effectiveness of COIN operations. The US effort in Iraq, viewed as a case study, provides a key lesson for conducting successful COIN. The posture of US forces prior to the "surge" overemphasized force protection and inhibited mission success. The perception of the US public's intolerance for casualties helped shape this counterproductive posture. In implementing the "surge," US commanders employed sound COIN doctrine and focused primarily on securing the population. This shift increased force protection risks but achieved appreciable operational gains that created conditions to enable strategic success.

Introduction

Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations have been a reality for nation-states for millennia. In recent years, operations in Iraq and Afghanistan heightened awareness of insurgencies and COIN. As a result, COIN has been the subject of much study. If history, especially recent history, is any indicator of the future, then the United States (US) military will need to maintain a sufficient capability to oppose insurgencies. US Department of Defense (DoD) policy specifies stability operations, which applies to COIN, as a core military mission. Current policy calls for the DoD to be prepared to conduct stability operations "with proficiency equivalent to combat operations," and when necessary, to "lead stability operations activities to establish civil security and civil control, restore essential services, repair and protect critical infrastructure, and deliver humanitarian assistance until such time as it is feasible to transition lead responsibility to other US Government agencies, foreign governments and security forces, or international governmental organizations."[1] Since COIN operations are a future reality, the US military should strive to understand how to conduct them successfully.

All military activities incur risks and COIN is no different. To manage these risks, commanders implement force protection measures. Although protecting the force is necessary in any threat environment, an overemphasis on force protection limits effectiveness of COIN operations.

This paper will use US military efforts in Iraq as a case study to demonstrate the necessary balance of force protection in COIN. From 2003 until the "surge" in 2007, US forces overemphasized force protection.[2] The perception of the American public's intolerance of US casualties influenced this force protection posture. The overemphasis on protecting the force produced the results of escalated violence and growing insurgent activity. In implementing the

"surge," US forces took a new approach in Iraq. Military leaders implemented strategies that were a practical application of COIN doctrine. These leaders took on a new force protection posture which increased the risk of US casualties. They further emphasized training Iraqi security forces which also carried risks. These risks caused additional US casualties but did not have an overall effect on the American public's support for the war. Despite initial increases in casualties, the risks taken achieved better results in the COIN mission. From the Iraq experience, this paper proposes lessons learned which can be, with careful application, used to inform future operations in balancing force protection against successful COIN.

"Pre-Surge" Iraq

The US experience in Iraq over the last 7 years provides ample material to study the relationship of force protection in COIN. Two primary time periods demonstrate differing approaches to force protection and effective COIN operations. These two periods, which are split by the implementation of the "surge" in early 2007, are best evaluated individually.

"Pre-surge" is defined as the earlier period from the invasion in 2003 to implementation the "surge" and was characterized by a poor application of COIN doctrine informed by an overreliance on force protection. The resulting security conditions for this period triggered a downward spiral that threatened the long-term success of the mission.

Force Protection Posture

This overemphasis on force protection characterizes the "pre-surge" period. Military commanders, Congress, and the American public naturally prefer avoidance of US casualties, so force protection has become a major theme in the conduct of US military operations. Increasing force protection can be counterproductive in COIN, because it keeps military forces isolated from and at odds with the population they must protect and affect. The US Army's *Field*

Manual (FM) 3-24 Counterinsurgency addresses force protection as one of its nine "Paradoxes of COIN Operations." Specifically, it says, "Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be."[3]

This concept proved true in Iraq before the "surge" as US military commanders positioned the bulk of their forces in large forward operating bases (FOBs) that provided a seemingly secure environment. However, these locations physically separated the COIN forces from the population. A senior British officer observed of his time of working with US forces in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, "Their [US Army personnel] instinct was to seek means to minimise [sic] frequent close contact with the local population, in order to enhance force protection, but this served further to alienate the troops from the population." He relates the resultant force posture as, "'they live[d] in fortified camps away from the population and most face-to-face contact…[was] during cordon and search or vehicle checkpoint operations.' Routine foot patrolling, a key means of interacting and thus gathering human intelligence (HUMINT), was the exception."[4]

In describing the consequence of this posture, he recognizes the short term force protection benefits but expresses the negative side as, "It equally helps to encourage the local sentiment that the troops are a distant, impersonal occupying force which has no interest in the population. It denies one avenue for nurturing popular support."[5] Similarly, David Galula, in *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, describes a pitfall of COIN as, "Units must be deployed where the population actually lives and not on positions deemed to possess a military value. A military unit can spend the entire war in so-called strategic positions without contributing anything to the insurgent's defeat."[6] This was the disposition of US forces in Iraq.

David Kilcullen describes the expected consequences of the US "pre-surge" force posture as, "Driving around in an armored convoy, day-tripping like a tourist in hell, degrades situational awareness, makes you a target, and is ultimately more dangerous."[7] In his book *The Accidental Guerilla*, he explains how this concept played out in Iraq. "Rather than working with the population so as to protect them from the insurgents, some units, because of their lack of situational awareness and personal relationships with the people, tended to treat all Iraqis as a potential threat and thus adopted a high-handed approach that alienated the population."[8] This high-handed approach produced many "accidental guerrillas," as Kilcullen labeled them, which further fed the growing insurgency.[9] He goes on to describe one insurgent tactic aimed at capitalizing on this concept by "intimidat[ing] government forces…in order to force them into defensive actions that alienate the population or deter them from taking active measures against the insurgents."[10] By adopting a force protection centered approach and alienating themselves from the population, US forces played directly into the hands of the insurgency.

By adapting this force protection centered approach, the US failed to secure the local population. A RAND study evaluating the COIN effort in Iraq from 2003 to 2006 stated, "The US military was too slow in making the security of the local population a primary mission, instead visibly concentrating on its own force protection, which appeared to locals to be at their expense. After sweeps and patrols pass through an area, control reverts to whoever previously displayed the greatest strength in these neighborhoods."[11] Basing decisions physically isolated US forces from the population, but tactics that were not oriented toward securing the population further alienated them.

Kilcullen described his observations of ineffective, even counterproductive, US tactical responses to mortar attacks in Baghdad. Helicopters would respond to the launching site within

minutes but were usually too late to observe insurgent activity. The result would typically be a blown up house which often resulted in civilian casualties and destruction of residential property which caused "progressively alienating village after village around major US bases over time, by creating a pool of people who hate the US at best…Once again the kinetic, offensive approach to force protection, and the placing of force protection at a higher priority than winning popular support…The ultimate effect is to alienate the population, the only real strategic 'force protection' we have."[12] Alienating the population in COIN can be catastrophic, but there are also implications of alienating the American public.

Casualty Aversion

Especially in democratic societies, the effect of public opinion cannot be ignored. The loss of life will naturally have some impact on public support for a war, but there are also other factors at work. The perception of intolerance of casualties by the American public has elevated force protection as a primary concern in military operations. The logical argument is that any decrease in force protection would increase the loss of US lives. Beyond the human cost, casualties can cause a loss of public support. Carl von Clausewitz wrote of war's "paradoxical trinity" as primordial violence associated with the people of the warring nation, chance managed by military leaders, and subordination of military efforts to political aims. He recognized the role popular opinion plays in war by claiming, "the passions…kindled in war must already be inherent in the people."[13] In the US today, a loss of public opinion could result in reductions in congressional funding of the military effort. Losing public support and funding would risk failure for any military operation.

The American public, no different from most civil societies, does not want the blood of their soldiers spilled without sufficient cause. The US experience with war has led to a distortion

of this viewpoint especially among decision-making elites. Jeffrey Record writes, "Nor is force-protection fetishism a passing phenomenon. It derives from America's disastrous experience in Vietnam and prevails among the present national political and military elites, who may have wrongly convinced themselves that the American people have no stomach for casualties, regardless of the circumstances in which they are incurred. Indeed, for these elites, Vietnam is the great foreign-policy referent experience--one seemingly validated by failed US intervention in Lebanon and Somalia."[14] Author Tom Ricks asserts the Commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq Gen George Casey's consolidation of forces to "big isolated bases…may have been under the sway of the view popular in the military that the American public is 'casualty intolerant' and that additional US losses would undermine whatever political support remained for the war."[15]

This common held belief that the US public is wholly intolerant of casualties is flawed. ABC News' Director of Polling, Gary Langer, reports, "Casualties…don't, in and of themselves, dictate public attitudes on war. The question is whether there's been a persuasive rationale for sustaining those casualties."[16] The research of political scientists Christopher Gelpi and Peter Feaver concludes that Americans will tolerate a significant human cost under the right circumstances. Specifically, "Casualties have not by themselves driven public attitudes toward the Iraq war, and mounting casualties have not always produced a reduction in public support. The Iraq case suggests that under the right conditions, the public will continue to support military operations even when they come with a relatively high human cost."[17] Gelpi and Feaver argue the public's tolerance for casualties "is primarily shaped by…beliefs about the rightness or wrongness of the war, and beliefs about a war's likely success."[18] They claim the likelihood of success is the strongest influence. Casualties do impact public opinion, but the likelihood of the mission's success and the persuasive rationale for the war have a greater impact.

This concept of casualty aversion has definitely influenced US policy. "The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine implicitly assumes that public tolerance of casualties is minimal in circumstances that do not satisfy the doctrine's use-of-force criteria, and this assumption elevates casualty minimization above mission accomplishment. Yet, this assumption…runs afoul of substantial evidence to the contrary…The assumption furthermore subverts the integrity of military intervention by compromising its potential operational and strategic effectiveness."[19] Granting primacy to force protection in decision making will always subordinate mission accomplishment. If the public's perception of an operation's chance of success most influences its opinion, then subordinating mission accomplishment is counterproductive for one more reason than the obvious.

Operational Results

The casualty averse mindset and the force protection posture of US forces inhibited them from establishing security for the population and was detrimental to their COIN mission. Throughout the "pre-surge" period, security conditions in Iraq continually worsened. A fiercely resistant insurgency quickly arose and grew in strength and lethality. With the Iraqi government and US forces unable to protect the population, sectarian violence grew to the forefront of security concerns threatening the viability of long term mission success.

Signs of a growing insurgency emerged early in Iraq. "By early November [2003]…, US military commanders in Iraq were themselves painting a grim picture. According to Lieutenant General Sanchez, the average number of attacks on American forces had grown from five per day in June to 'the teens' in September to 30–35 in October and to 40 by the end of November...One can make the argument that the insurgents' killing efficiency and the effectiveness of their attacks in fact improved."[20] A concern for security reached the highest

levels in Iraq as early as May 2003 when Ambassador Bremer was aware of and concerned about the deteriorating security conditions.[21]

As security declined, US forces became increasingly detached from the population as "[General Casey] was pulling his troops farther away from the population, closing dozens of bases in 2005 as he consolidated his force on big, isolated bases the military termed 'Super FOBs.'"[22] This approach by US forces in Iraq through 2006 failed to achieve significant gains against a persistent insurgency. "For years, US commanders had tended to seek strategic gains--that is, winning the war without taking tactical risks. They ventured little and so gained less. By making the protection of their own troops a top priority, and by having them live mainly on big bases and only patrol neighborhoods once or twice a day or night, they had wasted precious time and ceded vital terrain to the enemy. Also, their priorities undercut any thought of making the protection of Iraqi civilians their mission. That was literally seen as someone else's job--Iraqi soldiers and police."[23] Iraqi soldiers and police were not up to the task at the time.

Operation Together Forward I and II were Iraqi led operations from July to October 2006 to restore security in Baghdad. As Kimberly Kagan recounts, "The plan failed. US forces cleared the focus areas, but Iraqi security forces could not hold the neighborhoods. There were not enough Iraqi soldiers, and the National Police were insufficiently trained to handle the situation."[24] Ricks' description of the US force posture was "…hole[d] up in big bases, as the US military increasingly was doing in Iraq."[25] Their isolation from the population kept US forces from collecting HUMINT, a key ingredient for successful COIN.

HUMINT was not the only key ingredient missing. Protecting the population never became a top priority. "Until early 2007, the US COIN effort in Iraq neglected the protection of the people, a policy oversight that adversely affected the overall effort to rebuild the nation."[26]

One study concluded that at the end of 2006, "Though US forces continue to conduct highly visible operations throughout much of Iraq, swaths of the country remain firmly under insurgent control."[27] By late 2006, the downward spiral of violence in Iraq drove Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to claim, "Clearly, what US forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough."[28] A month later, after an exhaustive, comprehensive study, the Iraq Study Group concluded, "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating."[29] In 2009, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction identified poor security since 2003 as the foremost impediment to the $50 billion US reconstruction program.[30] The results of the COIN mission from the invasion through 2006 were not promising for long term success. However, the beginning of 2007 brought significant changes to US efforts in Iraq.

"Post-Surge" Iraq

The "surge" brought not only additional troops to Iraq, but a new approach which applied sound COIN doctrine and struck a better balance between force protection and mission accomplishment. The resulting improved security conditions offer a better chance of mission success.

COIN Strategy in Practice

In a major policy shift in January 2007, President Bush redefined and resourced the Iraq mission as a COIN effort. "Bush changed the mission, strategy, force size, and entire leadership team of the American war effort in Iraq. He changed the mission from transitioning responsibility to Iraqi Security Forces to securing the population."[31] Implementing the "surge" represented a recognition by US leadership of the benefits and requirements of an effective COIN operation. The policies enacted and actions taken by US military leadership during the

"surge" demonstrated resolve to balance force protection with COIN mission requirements. A solid understanding of COIN strategy basics is necessary to fully appreciate the strategy shift.

The most basic principle of COIN strategy is that protecting the population must be the highest concern. "The primary goal of COIN is to protect the population in order to obtain its tacit and active support in putting down the insurgency and thereby gain its allegiance. Until recently, this key tenet of COIN has been overlooked in Iraq…Until and unless there are sustained and meaningful signs of will and commitment on the part of the counterinsurgents, the allegiance of a besieged populace to a government they are somewhat detached from will remain problematic."[32] Securing the population cannot be a secondary effort but must remain the primary goal.

As stated earlier, some of FM 3-24's "Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency Operations" relate closely to force protection. The first is, "Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be." This dictum is explained by, "Ultimate success in COIN is gained by protecting the populace, not the COIN force. If military forces remain in their compounds, they lose touch with the people, appear to be running scared, and cede the initiative to the insurgents. Aggressive saturation patrolling, ambushes, and listening post operations must be conducted, risk shared with the populace, and contact maintained...These practices ensure access to the intelligence needed to drive operations. Following them reinforces the connections with the populace that help establish real legitimacy."[33]

The second force protection related paradox is, "The more successful the counterinsurgency is, the less force can be used and the more risk must be accepted…As the level of insurgent violence drops, the requirements of international law and the expectations of the populace lead to a reduction in direct military actions by counterinsurgents. More reliance is

placed on police work, rules of engagement may be tightened, and troops may have to exercise increased restraint. Soldiers and Marines may also have to accept more risk to maintain involvement with the people."[34]

Kilcullen writes of the importance of involvement with the people as a necessity to protecting them. "The most fundamental rule of counterinsurgency is to be there…If you are not present when an incident happens, there is usually little you can do about it. So your first order of business is to establish presence…This demands a residential approach: living in your sector, in close proximity to the population rather than raiding into the area from remote, secure bases. Movement on foot, sleeping in local villages, night patrolling--all these seem more dangerous than they are. They establish links with the locals, who see you as real people they can trust and do business with, not as aliens who descend from an armored box."[35] He expresses the concept and the reasoning in very simple terms of considering the population as a prize that can only be won by being where the people are.[36] He expounds on the imperative of a continuous security presence among the population with, "Population centers need to be secured 24 hours a day; otherwise, the enemy reinfiltrates the area and intimidates or co-opts the population, and only once security is consistently established can the population be won over and induced to provide information about local clandestine cells of the enemy, who can then be dealt with by police or intelligence services."[37]

Intelligence, which comes best from the local populace is key to COIN. Eliot Cohen and his co-authors consider intelligence to be the driver for operations. "Without good intelligence, a counterinsurgent is like a blind boxer wasting energy flailing at an unseen opponent. With good intelligence, a counterinsurgent is like a surgeon cutting out the cancers while keeping the vital organs intact. All operations must be shaped by carefully considered actionable intelligence

gathered and analyzed at the lowest possible levels."[38] Galula describes "gather[ing] the necessary intelligence" as the key to "elimination of the insurgent political cells" which allows the counterinsurgent to begin efforts "to win the support of the population."[39] If intelligence is key to securing the population and the population is the prize, then COIN forces must maintain a constant presence where the people are. Accepting the associated risk of spreading out amongst the people is necessary for successful COIN.

Force Protection Posture

In recognition of the necessary risks of COIN, Gen David Petraeus and his subordinate commanders implemented the "surge" by re-posturing their forces. Their new force laydown embraced COIN doctrine to strike a better balance between force protection and mission success. They moved US forces from outside the walls of large FOBs to smaller positions scattered throughout the local populace. "The people had needs, especially for security, but the Iraqi government couldn't provide it, so that opening was being filled by militias. 'We need to step into that gap,' [Gen Ray] Odierno ordered. The way to do that, he said to his advisers, was 'to get back out into Baghdad--I want my people out there.' In effect, they had reversed the American policy of the previous three years."[40] Taking the necessary force protection risk was not easy. "Moving American soldiers from big isolated bases and into new posts of 35…to around 100 [soldiers]…located in vacant schoolhouses, factories, and apartment buildings in Baghdad's neighborhoods was the hardest step. Essentially, US forces were sallying out to launch a counteroffensive to retake the city."[41] In February, the first surge brigade entered eastern Baghdad and established 19 new outposts.[42]

The new approach changed basing as well as tactics. In directing his unit as part of the first "surge" brigade, Maj Joseph Halloran recalls his direction as, "Get out of your Humvees, get

out of your tanks, your Brads, and walk around…Stop commuting to war…The concept of a super FOB is more damaging to the war effort than any Abu Ghraib or Haditha incident could ever be."[43] This approach was a significant departure from recent efforts. The 1st Cavalry Division Commander, Maj Gen Joseph Fil Jr., claimed that by May 2007 he had 75 percent of his combat forces off his headquarters post and spread out in Baghdad. "The typical cycle for a unit was five and a half days out, followed by one and a half back on post to rest, refit, check e-mail, and clean up. Having troops live where the action was added enormously to their effectiveness, not only in increased awareness but also simply in response time."[44] Ricks recounts a cavalry squadron commander in south Baghdad describing the change in posture and results as, "'The days of large cordon-and-sweep operations and hoping to find something…were over,' he said. Instead, he sent his soldiers into Iraqi homes to learn who lived in the neighborhood to converse, drink tea, take photographs and census data, and learn about local concerns. 'The American soldiers was [sic] no longer a mysterious authority figure speeding by in a HMMWV behind two-inch glass who occasionally rifled through their home."[45]

This new approach developed relationships between individual soldiers and the population which nurtured mutual trust and increased intelligence gathering. "After repeated encounters, our soldiers began to learn who was related, which families did not get along, who provided useful insight, and many other intimate details…AQI could no longer threaten individuals with violence after we left, because we never did…Also, locals began to report the emplacement of roadside bombs, which forced insurgents to switch to grenades and automatic weapons, which were riskier to use."[46] These changes in basing and tactics demonstrated the "surge" was a comprehensive approach to the conflict using COIN doctrine. Military leaders

recognized force protection risks were necessary for mission accomplishment. Another aspect of the comprehensive COIN strategy was utilizing Iraqi security forces.

Training of Iraqi Security Forces

Training Iraqi security forces is essential to COIN success but it comes with risk to US forces. "Indigenous forces are central to successful COIN, especially in view of the fact that the ultimate goal is allegiance to the legitimate government. Eventually, indigenous government forces must bear the entire responsibility for protecting citizens and defending the country…To prevent abuses and encourage professionalism, US forces should partner with indigenous forces down to the tactical level. Successful partnering is based on personal acquaintance and mutual trust."[47] Local forces require more than initial training. "In COIN, it is normally preferable to employ US military forces in combined operations with indigenous forces. Combined operations give the indigenous forces opportunities to emulate the skill and professionalism of US forces."[48]

Conducting combined operations and training Iraqi security forces requires arming them. Vetting is necessary to weed out potential insurgent infiltrators, but in the end, a US soldier hands a gun and bullets to an Iraqi. The force protection risk is obvious. Training and combined operations performed at the tactical level usually involve a small number of US troops in a potentially isolated environment. Combined operations of a border control station or a single guard post of a base are prime examples. In 2008, Iraqi security force members killed four US soldiers in two separate incidents in Mosul.[49] As indigenous forces become more capable and are given more responsibility, risks to US forces increase. Training local forces underscores the paradox of "the more successful the counterinsurgent is…the more risk must be accepted."[50] Although there is risk involved, capable indigenous forces engaged in COIN operations make a significant contribution.

Evidence in Iraq illustrates the effectiveness of properly trained indigenous forces. "By late March 2007, troops had shaken out into a series of joint security stations and combat outposts across Baghdad, with more being built every week…A sense of security was gradually returning to the local population. The problem of language, culture, and situational awareness, which had hampered our unilateral operations in 2006, was breaking down. Troops were closely partnered with Iraqi units down to the company and platoon level, and always left their patrol bases accompanied by Iraqis who could understand the local environment and act as a conduit to the population, with Americans in support."[51] Those US soldiers partnered at the platoon level assumed great personal risk as they were spread out and few in number. But the risk had its reward. "Having American troops in residence often dramatically improved the effectiveness of their Iraqi counterparts. Having Americans available to come to their aid--and perhaps to feed and outfit them--made Iraqi soldiers more comfortable about being out in the neighborhoods."[52] Intelligence gathering improved as "locals also generally found it easier to talk to the Iraqi troops, who often would pass along the information they gleaned to the Americans with whom they shared a post."[53]

Local security forces are not only helpful in the COIN effort, but they are key to long term success. Training indigenous forces comes with associated risks but is necessary to be successful. Once Iraqi forces, including police, can secure the population who sees them as legitimate, the COIN operation has set the conditions to enable strategic gains.

Casualty Aversion

Since strategic gains require operational and tactical risks, including casualties, it is relevant to consider how the American public will respond to such risks. Failing to achieve the benefits of COIN theory in practice by overemphasizing force protection assumes two major

risks: allowing the insurgency to strengthen and lengthening the conflict. Both risks would risk more lives of US service members and jeopardize the overall success of the mission. Clausewitz' trinity remains applicable with the public's embrace of the war being one of the three components nations must balance as "an object suspended between three magnets."[54] As long as the public supports the cause, understands the necessity of sacrifice, and can maintain a hope of improving conditions, the people will remain committed. Since the trinity, like the suspended object, is inherently unstable, it takes considerable effort to maintain the balance over time. Since COIN efforts are typically protracted over many years, it is essential to understand what truly impacts public opinion.[55] Casualties are typically considered one factor which impacts public opinion.

If effectively applied, sound COIN doctrine can lessen casualties and improve conditions over time. However, US forces incurred heavy initial losses as they assumed force protection risks in applying COIN doctrine in the "surge." "The first days were surprisingly violent, with an average of almost 180 attacks a day on US forces…During February 2007, Baghdad suffered an average of more than one car bomb attack a day. Between late January and late February, at least eight US helicopters were shot down."[56] Ricks described it as "taking more risks and losing more people."[57]

The additional losses did not translate directly to a decrease in public opinion. ABC polling data from the beginning of the Iraq war shows the trend of US public opinion supporting the war. Responses to the following question are shown in the chart below, "All in all, considering the costs to the United States versus the benefits to the United States, do you think the war with Iraq was worth fighting, or not?"[58]

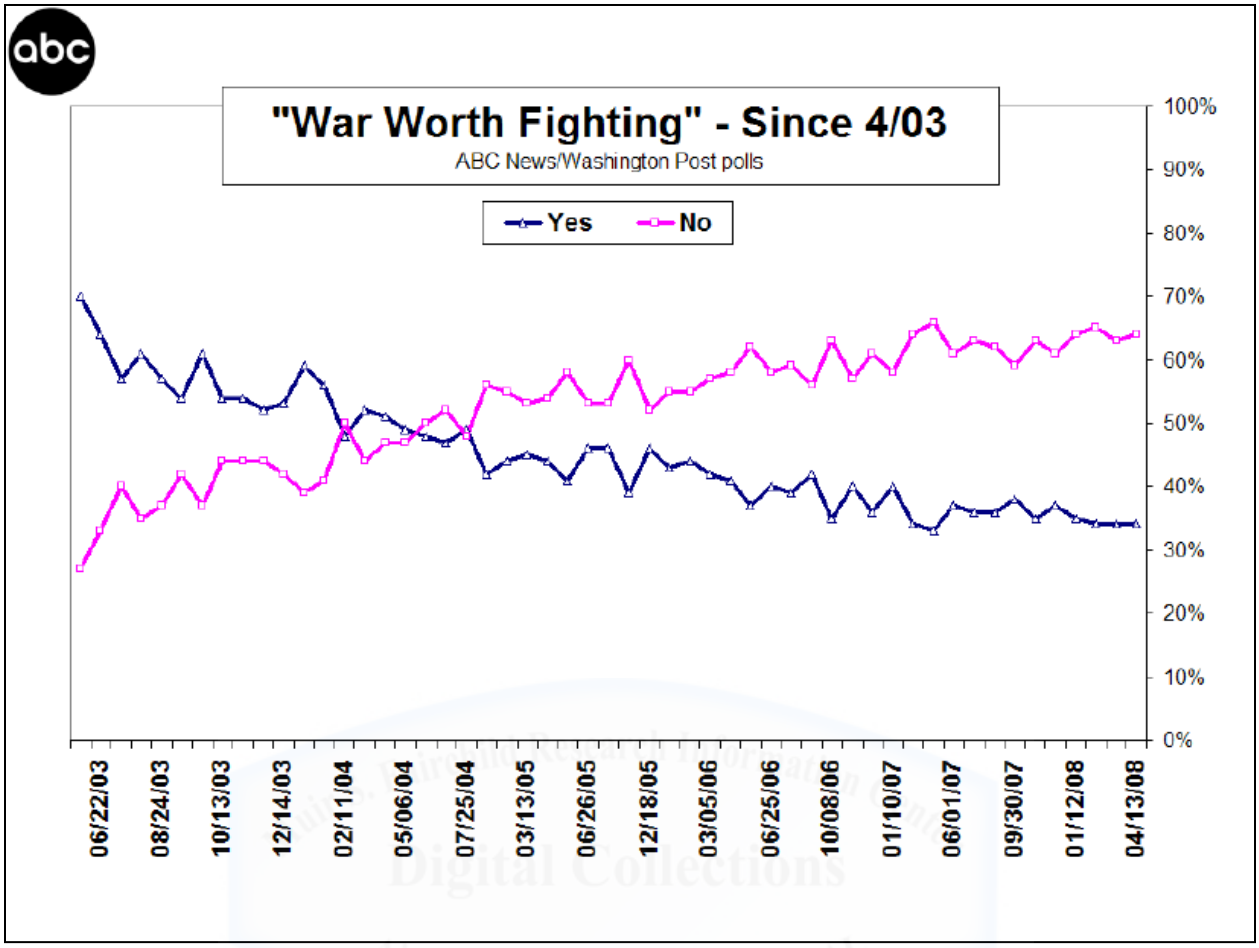

Figure 1. War Worth Fighting – Since 4/03

The data shows a general trend of declining support for the war over time. From a micro perspective, support dipped in the first half of 2007. However, from a macro view from 2003 to 2008, the general trend remained unchanged even through the higher casualty rates of the initial months of the "surge." The following chart displays the negative responses to the same question overlaid with cumulative US casualties from the war.[59]

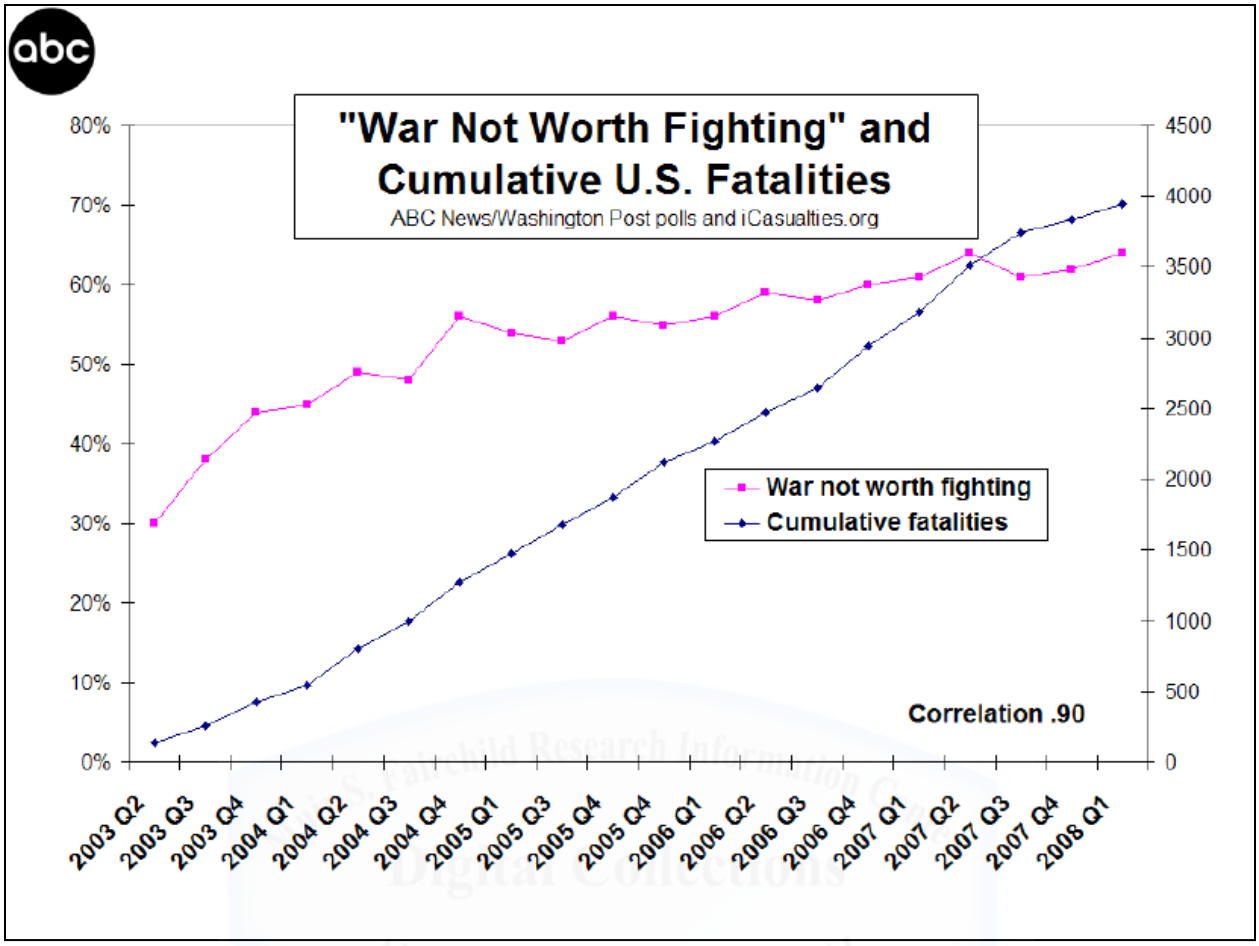

Figure 2. War Not Worth Fighting and Cumulative US Fatalities

This chart is not included here to highlight the high correlation between cumulative fatalities and opposition to the war because, as discussed earlier, there are many other factors which effect public opinion. The chart is included to highlight the negligible impact the early stages of the "surge" had on public opinion. Fatalities increased during the first half of 2007 as a direct result of the "surge." In those two quarters, the trend of public opinion against the war did not change any more significantly than the variations across previous quarters. Popular support for a war is dependent on many other factors beyond casualties, and in this instance, the additional casualties do not appear to have outweighed the other factors. The risk of losing

additional public support strictly due to increased casualties was not realized in Iraq. Public support trends remained steady, but results of the "surge" turned the tide of violence.

Operational Results

The idea turned out to be true that a change in force protection posture like the one implemented in the "surge" would place military service members at greater risk and increase the initial loss of life. But, the resultant increase in protection for the population, delivery of essential services and other improvements have benefits that outweigh the risk. Effective COIN operations reap the benefits of increased intelligence gathering from the population, increased opportunity for local governance reforms and governmental participation, and increased likelihood of quickening the overall strategic success. US forces began realizing these benefits as a result of the "surge." "American soldiers would really only start getting the requisite amount of information after they moved out into the population in 2007."[60] The shift in results came from a shift in approach more in line with COIN strategy.

The corresponding shift in force protection posture, as is predictable, did see an initial rise in casualties and violence. US combat deaths grew to 70 in February 2007, 71 in March, 96 in April, and 120 in May. "There were 6,037 'significant acts' of violence in Iraq during May 2007, the highest recorded total since 2004…The additional casualties had been expected as the price to be paid in the short term for moving from big, safe bases to smaller outposts among the population."[61] By continuing in the face of casualties, the new approach began to pay off. "Every day, American troops found that more Iraqis were beginning to talk to them. Better intelligence was coming in, and was being acted on more quickly, by units that lived on the next block instead of on the outskirts of the city."[62] The renewed focus on securing the population also brought positive results. "Even as US troop deaths increased, Iraqi civilian deaths appeared

to be declining, decreasing steadily from January [2007] on. Essentially, by moving out into the population, the military had interposed itself between the attackers and the people."[63] Results continued to spiral in a positive direction. "Throughout these offensive operations, we maintained constant focus on job one--protecting the population. By November, we could claim that attacks had dropped to their lowest levels since 2004-2005."[64] Civilian deaths in Baghdad for December 2007 dropped 70 percent compared to the previous year, and ethno-sectarian attacks dropped 90 percent over 2007.[65] "Obviously, it's entirely too early to declare victory and go home, but I think it's safe to say that the surge of Coalition forces--and how we employed those forces--have broken the cycle of sectarian violence in Iraq. We are in the process of exploiting that success."[66]

In describing the success, Ricks claims, "There is no question that the surge was an important contributor to the reduction in violence in Iraq and perhaps the main cause of that improvement." He tempers this praise with, "But its larger purpose had been to create a breathing space that would then enable Iraqi politicians to find a way forward and that hadn't happened."[67] If the US achieves strategic success or not, the Iraq experience offers valuable lessons for future COIN operations.

Lessons Learned

The primary lesson for COIN is that an overemphasis on force protection can limit the effectiveness of operations. The "pre-surge" force protection posture of US forces in Iraq made them unable to provide security for the population. The physical isolation and counterproductive actions created an ideological isolation which further prevented gaining the important benefits of popular support. In implementing the "surge," US commanders employed sound COIN doctrine and focused primarily on securing the population. In doing so, they changed the force protection

posture and initially increased the risk of casualties to US forces. In the short term, the risk turned into fact as the number of casualties increased. The increased casualties of the "surge" had no significant effect on US domestic approval of the war, but the new approach had a great positive impact on the operational mission. As US forces secured the population, they won their trust, gained additional local intelligence and created a more stable, secure environment. After an initial spike, violence dropped to a level significantly lower than before the "surge." Recognizing all military operations have inherent risk, US commanders assumed additional force protection risk to achieve operational gains. By avoiding overemphasis on force protection in applying sound COIN doctrinal concepts, the "surge" realized appreciable results in Iraq. Applying the same concepts in future operations will not always guarantee success.

Application

Caution is necessary when applying these lessons to future conflicts. First, every COIN effort is unique, so the exact circumstances warrant higher consideration over what has typically worked in the past. Second, security is only one part of a larger COIN effort. To draw the conclusion that risking more in force protection will automatically gain strategic success is a dangerous oversimplification.

Every COIN Effort is Unique

Commanders and policy advocates must use caution in applying lessons learned from Iraq to any future COIN effort. Each COIN operation involves different grievances and peoples, therefore requires its own unique approach. Templating one success onto another problem can bring about disastrous results. However, "While every insurgency is different because of distinct environments, root causes, and cultures, all successful COIN campaigns are based on common

principles."[68] The US experience in Iraq can only help inform future decision makers when considered in the context of common COIN principles.

Security is Only One Part of a Larger COIN Effort

Among these common principles is the concept that COIN is primarily a political effort supported by the military. "Military efforts are necessary and important to counterinsurgency efforts, but they are only effective when integrated into a comprehensive strategy employing all instruments of national power."[69] Much has been written on the methods and benefits integrating civil and military efforts in COIN. For example, "Civilian counterinsurgency (civil COIN), when combined with military operations, can weaken an insurgency. Thus, COIN as a whole is more likely to succeed if civil COIN can be performed despite insurgent violence."[70] COIN requires action beyond the military. "It follows that efforts to fill gaps in basic services, to build government capacity, and to create livelihood opportunities can be important in territory that is not entirely cleared of insurgents. While this poses serious security concerns, they can be surmounted if civil COIN and security measures are integrated operationally."[71] What is more important than operationally integrating civil and military COIN efforts is understanding that the eventual goal of any military COIN effort is to enable the civil authorities of the host nation to successfully operate independently.

The conflict in Iraq is not over, and final judgment on the strategic effectiveness of Operation Iraqi Freedom will only be given with the benefit of decades of hindsight by future generations. However, current evidence suggests the "surge" was an effective military strategy. The "surge," with its application of COIN principles, has to-date provided a security situation allowing progress in other lines of effort by the whole of government. The current path points toward successfully achieving the military end state and the removal of all US troops by the end

of 2011. However, overall strategic success of US efforts in Iraq will be largely dependent on actions from outside the military realm and on actions of the Iraqi people and government. Although each COIN effort is unique, lessons learned from applying COIN doctrine in Iraq could help military leaders in the future refine their balance between force protection and effective COIN operations.

Conclusion

Since COIN operations will be a staple of the military profession for the foreseeable future, military professionals should seek understanding of how best to achieve success. COIN, like all military activities, has inherent risks. Commanders who aptly manage these risks are more likely to achieve success. In COIN, force protection is one key risk commanders must balance to create the opportunity for success. Although protecting the force is necessary in any threat environment, an overemphasis on force protection limits effectiveness of COIN operations.

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[1] DODI 3000.05, *Stability Operations*, 1-2.
[2] Pirnie and O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, 70.
[3] Army FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, 1-26 through 1-27.
[4] Aylwin-Foster, "Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations," 31.
[5] Ibid., 31.
[6] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 78.
[7] Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles," 136.
[8] Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 124.
[9] Ibid., 124.
[10] Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 31.
[11] Pirnie and O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, 70.
[12] Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 125.
[13] Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.
[14] Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism," 5.
[15] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 13.
[16] Langer, "War in Iraq: The Public Perspectives."
[17] Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, "Success Matters," 8.
[18] Ibid., 8.
[19] Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism," 6-7.
[20] Hoffman, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*, 14.

[21] *Hard Lessons*, 72.
[22] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 13.
[23] Ibid., 159.
[24] Kagan, *The Surge*, 11-13.
[25] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 29.
[26] Pirnie and O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, xvi.
[27] Ibid., 70.
[28] Ibid., 17.
[29] Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, xiii.
[30] *Hard Lessons*, vii-ix.
[31] Kagan, *The Surge*, 28.
[32] Pirnie and O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, xvi.
[33] Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, 1-26 through 1-27.
[34] Ibid., 1-27.
[35] Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles," 136.
[36] Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 73.
[37] Ibid., 94.
[38] Cohen et al., "Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency," 50.
[39] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 81, 84.
[40] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 156.
[41] Ibid., 165.
[42] Ibid., 166.
[43] Ibid., 166.
[44] Ibid., 169.
[45] Ibid., 176.
[46] Ibid., 176-177.
[47] Pirnie and O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, 80-81.
[48] Ibid., 76.
[49] "Iraqi soldier kills 2 U.S. troops, hurts 6," *Army Times*, 9.
[50] Army FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, 1-27.
[51] Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 135.
[52] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 191.
[53] Ibid., 191.
[54] Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.
[55] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 6.
[56] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 166.
[57] Ibid., 171.
[58] Langer, "War in Iraq: The Public Perspectives," 5, 8.
[59] Ibid., 14.
[60] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 163.
[61] Ibid., 179.
[62] Ibid., 191.
[63] Ibid., 193.
[64] Odierno, "The Surge in Iraq."
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ricks, *The Gamble*, 296.
[68] Cohen et al., "Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency," 49.
[69] Army FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, 2-1.
[70] Gompert et al., *Reconstruction Under Fire*, 1.
[71] Ibid., 87.

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